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Editorial Page

Central America. Ouch!

By Marvin Stone

While the White House justifiably celebrates its success in bringing the Soviet Union back to arms talks, its policy on another vital issue, Central America, is adrift and barely skirting the shoals.

It is almost as if we as a nation have embraced the fallacy that if you ignore a problem long enough, it will go away. This one won't. There is no regional problem more likely to reach a critical mass in 1985 than Central America.

Yet we appear to be operating in that area without a chart, much less a compass. Are we supporting the guerrillas in Nicaragua in an effort to overthrow the Sandinista regime? Or are we merely trying to induce those Marxist leaders to quit backing leftist guerrillas in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America? And finally: If elimination of the Sandinistas is as vital to the U.S. as some key officials maintain, are we prepared to send American troops to do the job if all else fails?

As Assistant Editor Joseph Fromm describes it in his analysis on page 28 of the current issue: "The White House aim is to try to muddle through in Nicaragua in 1985 to avoid either another Cuba—a second Communist base in the Western Hemisphere—or another Vietnam—American military involvement in a local war."

For almost four years, the President has been bobbing and weaving to avoid coming to a showdown over Nicaragua. He believes correctly that significant U.S. interests are at stake, but wants desperately to avoid committing troops to fight there, as they did in Grenada.

Instead, the President allowed the Central Intelligence Agency to underwrite a large-scale guerrilla war in Nicaragua with ill-defined objectives. The administration's public position is that its aim in this widely publicized covert operation is to persuade the Nicaraguan government to behave. But the guerrillas, the *contras*, have a far more ambitious goal: To break the back of Sandinista rule and throw the rascals out.

To compound the disarray, the White House

apparently is unwilling to muzzle key Pentagon officials who make no secret of their support for the *contras*' ultimate design.

In those circumstances, Congress is unwilling any longer to bankroll the rebels. The administration refuses to accept this congressional veto of its policy. Instead, U.S. allies who are beneficiaries of our military and economic assistance, such as Israel and Honduras, are being encouraged secretly to take over Washington's role of underpinning the guerrillas.

No one, not even their most ardent backers in the CIA, believes with great conviction that the *contras* are capable of overthrowing the regime in Nicaragua. Attrition is not a viable policy, not so long as Cuba and the Soviet Union keep pumping in arms and money. All of which raises the question of whether the U.S. is pursuing a dead-end strategy in Central America, one that could see this country stumbling into disaster. The end result could indeed be direct American involvement in a shooting war or, alternatively, a national humiliation.

Clearly, it is time for us—and that means the White House, State Department, CIA, Pentagon and Congress—to get together and clean up the mess in our Central America policy. Indeed, past time. It is up to the President to define the true U.S. interest in this region and thereby determine what commitments are warranted to defend that interest.

There is an urgent need to impose a common strategy on contending forces within the Reagan administration—those who favor a diplomatic effort for an accommodation with the Sandinistas and those bent on ousting the Marxist government by military means. Their disagreement and infighting serve no constructive purpose.

No less essential is that the President carry directly to the public the course that this country should take to end chronic instability in Central America. A policy that does not command the support of the people can lead only to failure.

Marvin Stone is the
Editor of *U.S. News & World Report*.